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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of first year college students about children, childhood, and childrearing that comprise their naive theories about children's development. Participating in the study were 122 students in the undergraduate Home Science program at the University of Baroda, India. All participants were women, 18 to 19 years old, from middle- to upper-middle-class families. Before beginning the introductory course of their program, students provided written responses to two questions on the nature of children and the expectations they had regarding their course of study. Results indicated that the students had a very positive picture of children as lovable, innocent, curious, and constantly learning. Children were also perceived as future citizens. However, no student expressed the traditional Indian view of children as carriers of family lineage, name, and heritage. Childhood was viewed as a sensitive period in which children are very moldable and in which, therefore, the environment plays an important role. The students thought that a course on child development should inform students about the nature of children and their development, as well as discuss how children learn, how to discipline and interact with children so that they become good citizens, and how to meet the needs of children with disabilities. (Contains 11 references.) (KDFB)

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BELIEFS ABOUT CHILD, CHILDHOOD AND UPBRINGING: A CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL NICHE

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about "child", "childhood" and "child upbringing" add up to naive theories about children's development. Every culture has such theories. Such beliefs and personal theories that individuals hold are a very crucial component of the developmental niche of a child.A study was therefore conducted on a sample which was a potential group for becoming child care professionals. College freshman, 122 adolescent girl students in the first year of the bachelor's degree course in Home Science (in the years 1992, 1993 and 1994) from the faculty of Home Science, M.S.University of Baroda, India formed the sample.Before being introduced to the course they were asked to respond to open ended questions on the nature of children and what they expected to study in the course. Content analyses of the responses revealed, by and large, a very positive picture of a child as lovable, innocent and curious, an entity who is learning all the time. Childhood, the respondents noted is a sensitive period and therefore the child is very mouldable, environment, especially parents, play a very important role in the life of the child. A course on child development, most of the respondents felt, should inform the student about the nature of the child, different aspects of his/her development, how children learn, how to discipline and behave with children so that they become "the best", "good citizens", and also regarding the needs of handicapped children and how to interact with them. The findings are discussed in the light of ecological perspective and developmental niche, and implications for the training of child care personnel are drawn.

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BELIEFS ABOUT CHILD, CHILDHOOD AND CHILD UPBRINGING: A CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL NICHE

* Rajani Konantambigi

Introduction

In the understanding of child development, until recently the role of culture was not given due recognition in most child development or developmental psychological research. The thrust in the earlier research, notably in the classic studies by Whitting and Child and others (see reference list) following the psychological approach, was on the effect of antecedent variables like culture, in childhood. Further, the antecedents of adult personality were traced to cultural influences during childhood. This approach, Super and Harkness (1986) note, had to be modified as empirical research did not support such a stance. While stimuli in the environment and environmental variables had been more than acknowledged in psychological research,the process aspects or the how of child development had not received much impetus. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provided direction in this mould, but most of the research on contexts of development has not been in the ecological framework in the ktrue sense of the term (Valsiner & Benigni, 1986). However,the former has drawn attention of researchers to the context of child development and it has potentials to explain the varied contexts and processes in child development..ls1

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Super and Harkness' (1986) "developmental niche" provides a framework to identify more specific components and dynamics/processes of the context in which the child develops. In the words of the authors, "...The components of the developmental niche has three major subsystems which operate together as a larger system and each of which operates conditionally with other features of the culture. The three components are: (1) the physical and social settings in which the child lives; (2) culturally regulated customs of child care and child rearing; and (3) the psychology of the caretakers. These three subsystems share the common function of mediating the individual's developmental experience within the larger culture. Regularities in the subsystems, as well as thematic continuities from one culturally defined developmental stage to the next, provide material from which the child abstracts the social, affective, and cognitive rules of the culture, much as the rules of grammar are abstracted from the regularities of the speech environment. The three components of the developmental niche form the cultural context of child development". (Super & Harkness, 1986, p.552).

For the past decade research of the "developmental niche" has begun to be explored by Super, Harkness and colleagues (Super & Harkness, 1986; Gill & Super, 1994). In a study on Kenyian child care setting (Super & Harkness, 1986), the first component of the developmental niche has looked into the physical and social settings, specifically, those aspects that

provide nurturant behaviours, determine the kind of social interactions that are initiated with the child and the opportunities that are provided.

The Indian scene: On reviewing some research on child care and upbringing in the Indian context, one finds the following: The process of socialization has been given prominence in some studies. The well-known psychoanalytic analysis of the child in the traditional Hindu System by Sudhir Kakar may be considered to be on the lines suggested by the developmental niche model. He captures the cultural beliefs and practices associated in the upbringing of the child. These have been largely traced through the analysis of mythology and folk stories supported by observations of the context of the child (Kakar, 1978;1979). Some of the current research on child and adolescent development and socialization in India has taken into account the context of development and there are examples where the process of socialization has been given prominence. Socialization of children in the weavers' community of Varanasi (Anandlakshmy & Bajaj, 1981) and socialization of adolescent girls in rural and urban slum communities in Gujarat, (Saraswathi & Dutta,1988),are examples from the early 1980s. A profile of adolescent girls in towns and urban slums has been a more recent one (Sharma 1992). Here issues in their identity formation have been explored.

Misri (1985) following the methodology of social anthropology (ethnographic field study) has brought out the cultural construction of child and childhood. Here she concentrates on the cultural beliefs and practices, especially in

a social order. According to her, the childhood construct in India encompasses dualities. Dualities are seen as the child is considered to be "....ritually impure yet innately sacred and pure; it is likened to a sudra*, yet considered worthy of worship; it is initially both male and female; and is both human and divine. Since the child is neither fully entrenched in the world (sansar), nor completely separated from the divine, its relationship with God is non-dualistic and requires no mediation. On becoming increasingly social, the child secures a high ritual status at the expense of innate sacredness and purity. The greater the ritual purity the more susceptible it is to defilement and impurity" (Misri, 1985, p.131). And yet without undergoing the rituals a child does not qualify as a person of higher caste. These practices and the beliefs that the caregivers of children hold are realities in certain communities and geographical areas.

In the present study, certain aspects of the psychology of the caretakers (potential ones) is explored vis-a-vis nature of child, "childhood", and beliefs related to upbringing and disciplining children. Psychology of the caretaker (which forms the second component of the developmental niche) is an important link between the social and physical settings of child care, as in the early years it is the caretaker who mediates between the environment and the child. The caretaker also interacts with/reacts to the temperament of the child.

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* Sudra - a person belonging to a lower caste in India.

The sample in the study, older adolescent girls enrolled for an introductory course in child development are potential caretakers as they may later be employed in institutions for child care, and/or may become mothers. The studies of such a group will throw light on the conceptualizations about children held by an undergraduate population.

Method

Sample: One hundred and twenty two, eighteen to nineteen year old adolescent girls in the freshman year of the undergraduate course in Home Sciences at M.S. University of Baroda, India, formed the sample. The adolescents belonged to middle and upper-middle class families. The data was collected in the years 1992,1993 and 1994.

Tools and procedures: The study is qualitative in nature. Written responses to the following two open ended questions were elicited:

When you think of a child what comes to your mind?/Nature of the child? Who is a child? How should one bring up children?

What do you expect to learn in the introductory course on Human Development and Family Studies?

Responses yielded short essays. These responses were elicited in the very first hour of the course commencement.

Analysis: Content analysis of the responses was done manually by going through the responses. Responses were grouped into categories and sub-categories. The category labels that have been reported are not those necessarily suggested by the respondents. However, typical responses have been quoted extensively in presenting the results. In an elaborate report percentages have also been utilised where appropriate.

Limitations of the study: No subsidiary questions were asked to seek clarity on what adolescents had written.

Sources of their beliefs and perceptions were also not identified.While the responses are in the realm of the psychology of potential child care-takers, there will be a gap between the beliefs and practices. Therefore, they are only an indication of what the care-takers may bring to the child care situation.

Results and Discussion:

Results are presented in a narrative style using quotations of the respondents and by also making use of the percentages calculated.

By and large, the child has been perceived in a very positive light. The innocence of childhood is celebrated; terms such as "pure" and "virtuous" have been used to describe a child. Childhood is the most enjoyable period of life; a period, "...full of joys" and "...free from tension". Together with

this, perceptions that children are in the stage of learning and growing, and that their needs have to be catered to, reflect the indulging attitude/beliefs that exist culturally (Kakar, 1978). Culturally Indians are socialized to perceive the child in highly positive terms. However, certain respondents have given negative labels like, `child cannot comprehend', `is immature', `ignorant', `vulnerable', `helpless', `independent' etc. This may be attributed to the respondents' perception that a child is perceived to be in the process of growing, the child's personality is in the making; to use the existential term, s/he is in the "becoming" state.

The Indianess of the beliefs and perceptions continues as one examines as to what child care involves and the aspects related to disciplining children. Children are helpless, dependent, but are capable of learning and can also be disciplined. The belief that children need to be indulged comes through quite strongly. This view does not exist only as a part of cultural belief, it is a part of the beliefs held by the present youth. However, the respondents feel that this indulgence needs to be tempered by guidance and by not over-pampering/indulging and "spoiling" the child. The controls and guidance that they talk about, the cause-effect relations that are there in their conceptualizations reveal the influence of Western and modern child rearing. The western/modern practice and guidance for child upbringing advocates setting limits on children's behaviour, and advocates preparing them for competitiveness and a faster pace of life, respecting the child

and training the child for self-reliance. The latter approach reflects a child-centered approach to upbringing along with socialising the child for the expected adult world. The responses also reveal that the adolescents of today need preparation for child care and upbringing. They need knowledge and preparation to perform various tasks of child care. The context of their ecology does not equip them totally for this role.

Gender bias in language usage by the respondents may be considered to be reducing as she and both "s/he" utilised in the writing about the child. This is a welcome change given the strong cultural heritage of gender bias in almost all walks of life.

Children in the present study have been perceived as country's future citizens. In India children are more commonly perceived as old age security for the parent, that is, children have economic value. Economic value of children is one of the prime reasons for population explosion in India, and there is empirical support. (Jasrai, 1995; Nayar, 1989). No respondent speaks about traditional beliefs regarding offsprings as carriers of family lineage, name and heritage, and to carry out the last rites after parents' death.

Quite a number of respondents have been articulate about children's needs, what are some of the challenges involved in child care and upbringing, and what they would like the content of the study course to be. However the course content perception is by and large limited to the knowledge content, and some skills

required in dealing with children.

Children's needs, requirements for child care and appropriate ways suggested for disciplining and behaving with children reveal respondent's beliefs and ideals vis-a-vis children and child care. Certain respondents have gone into explaining cause-effect relations, i.e., a consequence of behaving in a particular way with the child. Children's needs that the respondents articulated are love and affection, security and support, health needs, learning needs, educational need, need to train for independence and self-reliance and a harmonious environment for development. Explaining why one should cater to the needs of children, some respondents believe that the child will get irritated and grow up to be difficult and unhappy. Some of them also believed that childhood is the sensitive, formative stage, therefore one should provide and care for children, the environment has to be good. Early influences, they said, have an impact on the later personality.

Understanding the various needs, likes and dislikes of children, their behaviour, their cognitive needs too, and knowing the environmental effects on the child, the respondents said are the important adult requisites for child care. Patience on the part of adults and learning how to care and rear children is also essential they felt. Respondents believed that one has to balance indulgence and disciplining the child. They also felt that one has to encourage and support children's activities and development.

Some of the "appropriate ways of behaving with children" noted by the respondents were, "...not to scold them", "...not injure their ego and pride", "...not to make them subservient", "...not to get angry even though they may be wrong sometimes", and "...to take responsibility for children". The responses again reflect the basic sensitivity towards children and the understanding they have of this stage. This also reflects the milieu of the adolescents which provides such appropriate exposure to them. Further, the respondents felt that the teacher's role was to facilitate the transition of the child from home to school (and teacher was also mentioned as being a significant influence on the child). Other significant influences mentioned were parents (mother mostly) elders and "the environment" in that order. The latter was seen as "...helping unfold potentialities". While media was also perceived as playing an important role in children's lives, it has not been elaborated.

These beliefs and perceptions and actions/behaviour for child care and upbringing that exist in these adolescent minds, on the whole, reflect that certain scientific and current knowledge about the child has percolated to the middle class population who have had 10+2 years of education.

The curriculum content noted by the respondents in the study who are as yet unexposed to specific knowledge and training in child development may be compared with that mentioned by the alumni of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, M.S. University of Baroda, India, and the experts in the field of

human development and family studies (Saraswathi, Verma & Kalra, 1988). The former, focussed on knowledge related to child health, nutrition, child psychology and development, and a few respondents have made a mention of skills like working with groups of children and handicapped children. Whereas the latter, alumni and the experts in the field have emphasized abilities and skills on the job, like cognitive competency in executing and planning for children's programmes on a long term basis, group work related competencies in working with individuals, and skills related to managing an organization, research related skills and personal skills like cognitive abilities for alertness, open mindedness to ideas and people, analytical thinking, imagination, intelligence, perseverance, objectivity, and socio-emotional skills like sensitivity, patience, involvement, sincerity, interest, sense of responsibility, professional ethics, etc. The stage of education they are in, does not make the respondents of the present study think about job requirements per se. Studies of people on the job help revise the curriculum in a better manner.

The responses in the present study also reveal that to quite an extent they are aware of the needs in undertaking child care and related tasks. An awareness about children's needs and tasks in child care exist in these adolescents and that is a welcome sign as it aids in better parenting. However, a note of caution is necessary as: (a) quite a number of respondents have not expressed their views and ideas about all the aspects of the psychology of the care giver discussed here. Further more, no probing was done regarding the views that they have expressed.

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